

Made of steel and full of blood



*By
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OUROBOROS///

chainguns feral dog bark down
empty streets. hearts matching their pulsing fire.
everything feels like it happens six feet away and six seconds ago to
someone else. so: i can
drive the knife a little bit deeper. once, in the cold,
i warmed my hands in her blood, and now i have moments
on the train, or in the mess hall,
or ascending into the five metre high chest cavity-borne cockpit of my
vehicle
where i stare at the world and think about how you reconcile the cruellest
thing you've ever done to a person.
other times
i brainstorm how to top it, or
how to do it to myself.
my finger pulls back before i even register what's around me, it's all
muscle memory now
and the burstfire's easy. just a little bit of rise
and his guts are painted on the stained slum wall behind him.
you hear footsteps on the floor above and the muttered curse from your
sergeant. "these sewer rat fucks are everywhere".
last night they were in the sewer, and when the sun came up
most of them had been splattered into the wastewater of the capitol, high
explosive grenades
dropped through manholes, and mg nests set up on
service platforms just waiting to chew through the leftovers.
the rats had a better chance of living that night
scuttling between shrapnel fire & human waste
splattered crosshatch slime crust across
cement walls. the acid gore and shit burned everything in my nostrils
to scorched ash so: i can
drive the knife a little bit deeper. no sleep necessary.
the fetid corpses of Liberation Force pigs
are the only smelling salts i need.
sound of a flashbang. smoke ghost-wafting
from the floor above. the yelling of
comrades and bogeys and children hidden under
kitchen sinks. pounding of boots
on old wooden floors. pull back
and fire through the wall. shift to the
right, pulse up the stairs

*and through the doorway
and fire again. two more confirmed.
stare out at the world and tell me
what the colour of the sky looks like to you now.
i'm always wiping my glasses
cause i can never see anything.
all i taste is dust. all i hear are
the howls and screams our bestial lives
spawn in the labyrinths that surround us.
i take the sword to my brainstem
and I hack it to pieces. and still it never stops.
voices cut through the haze of psychosis,
less as lightning and more like
smears of people staining
the roadway, and the sides of cars, and
underneath my fingernails and my eyes and my skin. it clots in my hair
and when i sleep i pull the black tangles out from the root.
yet i fail to do so elsewhere.
sometimes the way rebels are sliced down by rifle fire
reminds me of pris, whose femoral artery was opened up
by a 50 cal round cutting through nighttime
and soft tissue. when i cut her open later to stay warm
i wondered what it meant to coat your body
in the viscera of your beloved.
i consider this now
as i down one with a burst through the gut
and send his squadmate pinwheeling with three through the shoulder.
boots swamped in grey matter make a certain kind of wet slap
on the prefab floors of expensive apartments.
once this sector's clear and we sit on the roof sharing cigarettes i dream
of a stinger through my throat, and choking facedown in the rubble
of an obliterated five over one, thinking about
how long i ached for it compared to
how fast it felt when it finally happened. it is here
that i stumble upon the answer to something i have been pondering:
the dull beating of the drums of war never ceases,
even in my final moments,
real or imagined.*

everyone's clambering over rubble just trying to get off of the big guy's way, toting that giant cannon, the backblast was brutal; it sent big chunks of force with each shot that would knock your instruments out of whack. If you stood too close to it when it was fired, if the enemy shot well enough they could hit it and make it explode and then you'd be dust in the cosmic ether. Generally the soldiers thought they were death traps, but the people who used them tended to be very proud of 'em. They certainly commanded a level of respect, for taking on the additional risk of wielding such a dangerous & cumbersome weapon and for being so invaluable in combat. From behind me comes the THUNK of the gun firing & sending off a used cartridge case. I'm brought out of my trance, laying prone on a mound of concrete and wood and metal and stone, explosive ammunition now flying off across the crumbling city block we gaze upon and striking with a terrible flash of light the only building

SR-7Z ARTILLERY RIFLE

Width: 19.69"

Height: 24.93"

Barrel Length: 49.5"

Overall Length: 105"

Weight: 26.24 lb

Weight (Loaded): 39.12 lb

Ammunition: SR-7Z [Special]

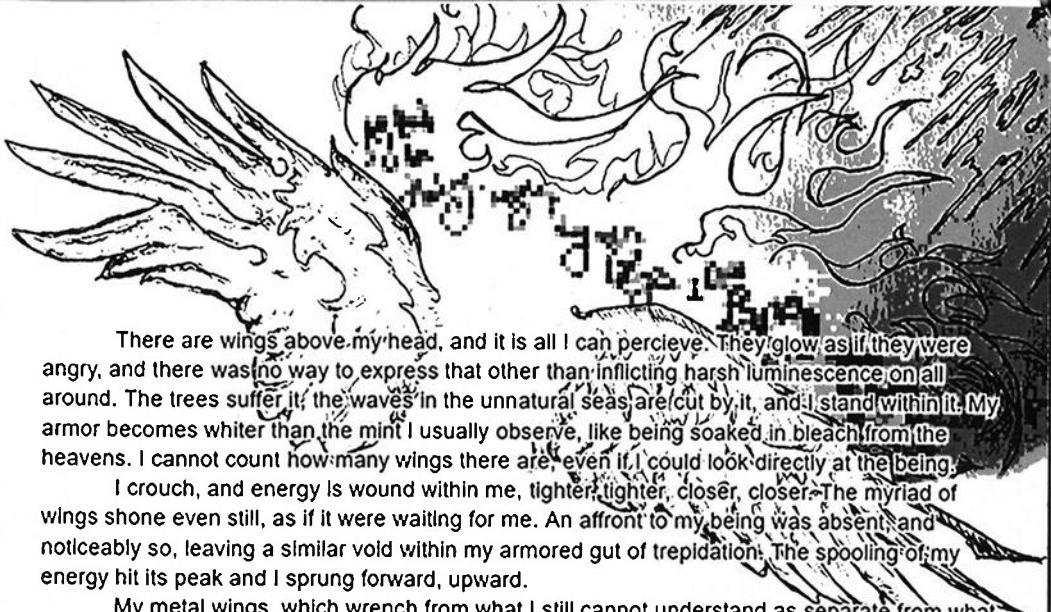
Capacity: 30, beltfed

Magnification: 1-6x

Reticle: Imperial Standard

For use with models M8A and N4B





There are wings above my head, and it is all I can perceive. They glow as if they were angry, and there was no way to express that other than inflicting harsh luminescence on all around. The trees suffer it; the waves in the unnatural seas are cut by it, and I stand within it. My armor becomes whiter than the mint I usually observe, like being soaked in bleach from the heavens. I cannot count how many wings there are, even if I could look directly at the being.

I crouch, and energy is wound within me, tighter, tighter, closer, closer. The myriad of wings shone even still, as if it were waiting for me. An affront to my being was absent, and noticeably so, leaving a similar void within my armored gut of trepidation. The spooling of my energy hit its peak and I sprung forward, upward.

My metal wings, which wrench from what I still cannot understand as separate from what was once flesh on my back, mirror the array of light before me. I can hear my joints whine and think of my fragile bones snapping against an unseen force, for which steel seems a much better match, but not wholly, as metal turns to scrap and is pulled from me, exposing my pulsating innerworkings. I can't tell what is meat and what is machine; it all writhes, it all breathes, it all lives. Where armor has been blown back I can feel the accost of the angel, a being which I yearn to know, are you so different from me, in this state? Is the light that pours from you merely armor you are encased in, linked to, clinging to you as much you cling to it for salvation? My armor is my salvation, without it I would be a pile of grime and blood smeared hundreds of feet below, against a swathe cut through the organic matter that struggles to prosper on a clear afternoon now that the sea has risen so far, obliterated by something more than what they can comprehend. I don't think the man who put me in this suit is any different, he a being of meat and skin, a brain unconnected from wires and circuitry. His pulse doesn't beat through ducts carrying his will through metal limbs strong enough that if turned to malfunction would leave what is still soft inside, what is left of the form that he is the same image of, to an unthinking-paste, of red and gore, and the impulse that commands those limbs would cease and they would fall limp. It would be painless, as being a part of this fortified beast removes me from pain; whether through numbness or failing to understand pain any further, I don't remember. I don't want to remember, either in bliss through awesome and terrible power.

A ray of light is cast through my arm where armor has been torn. I can't feel it, but I scream. I have no mouth to do so, but I scream as loud as my mind can manage.



OVERVIEW

Social infrastructure has completely broken down. All major hospitals in the capital have been subject to artillery attack or other explosive bombardments and no longer serve the public. Despite heavy fighting many civilians remain trapped within the capital; testimony from many indicates that this is the case across all major cities within the country's borders. The borders remain fully blockaded. Travel within the combat area is arduous and dangerous.

MAIN FORCE

RESOURCE UPDATE

As best as investigating unit could tell, shipments of supplies (food, drinking water, clothes, etc.) are no longer taking place within the country. Civilian testimony indicated that until November when shipments stopped trucks were almost always assaulted & looted or diverted by one or more of the groups involved in the fighting; this caused the stoppage of all shipments period.

This is a safe assumption that any remaining stock piles are hidden & heavily guarded.

COMBAT UPDATE

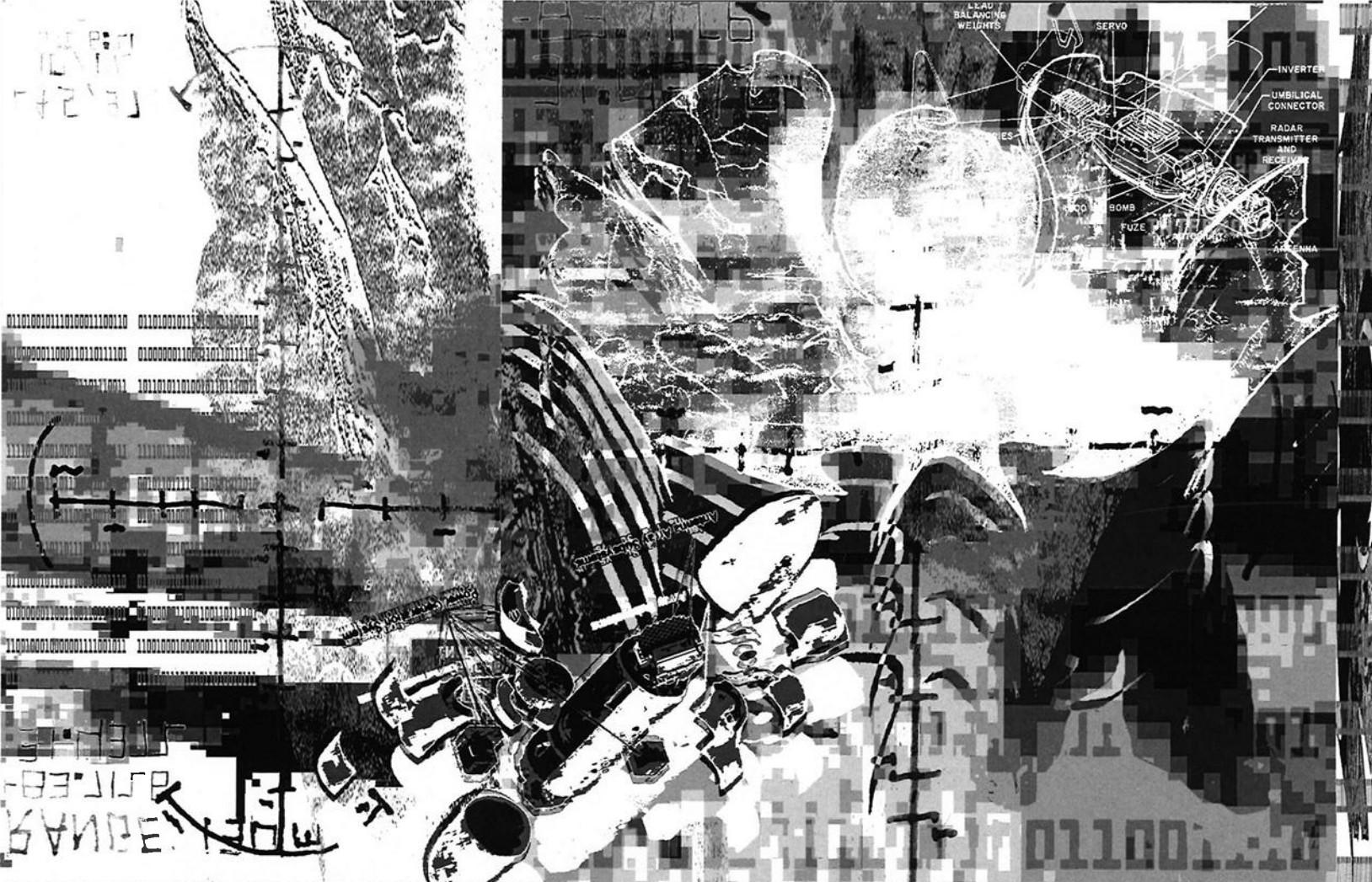
Use of Individual Mechanized Personnel (IMPs) remains the hinge on which the conflict swings between sides. The national armed forces retain the bulk of these units, and the invading forces have a similar number. The rebel groups that have splintered off both also maintain small numbers of IMP units, many of which are presumably stolen or looted during battle. However, multiple witnesses claim to have seen new versions of these units, with capabilities and appearances not listed in our glossaries. Unit was unable to investigate during this trip; such matters must be undertaken secretly, with great care and robust preparation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Evacuation of civilians should be first priority, but may not be possible. Shipping supplies in will be expensive and dangerous but if the situation is allowed to progress as it is: degrading - models show hundreds of thousands will die from all causes (combat, starvation, illness, etc.) within the next 6 months.

Rebel groups may be willing to negotiate getting supplies to civilians trapped in the conflict zone; national government and primary opposition force should be expected to treat any aid workers with hostility.

AIRPORT ONE



We always launch under blue skies, into clouds ballooning like pastry cream piped onto a

ID Max 2 picture-perfect pallet in the summertime, and into dimly illuminated cerulean grace fully
25 brushed with white splashes spread out thin & soluble in the winter. In the basement
30 boiler room of an elementary school, corners of Fernwood and 37th, Lieutenant moves
6 little plastic pieces on his gameboard, telegraphing armies' moves before they happen,
11 cursing intelligence guys none of us know whenever they're wrong. In the makeshift
20 showers we set up on the safe side of crumbling factory loft buildings, their days as
upscale apartments nestled deep in a past before artillery shells started landing on and

around them morning afternoon & night, we talk about LT and his many irksome habits.
Davis - ever the psycho bitch - was the first to suggest fragging him. Not like one of our
units couldn't take care of LT in a moment, all he's got is that little pea-shooter sidearm,
which must make him feel like a real classical military man, useless as it is in this modern
war we're waging on ourselves. My Strada V1 is thrice his size with a foot something like
9x3m and made of some mystery combination of hard blued steel and high-science
polymer. LT could stand there all day emptying mags into any part of Susie - that's her
name, my Strada's name - and he's not leaving anything more than cosmetic damage.

Once he's on the bottom of my heel, flesh paste on the dark slate three-taloned animal claw
bolted into a mechanical ankle joint, he isn't anything but cosmetic damage either. I think
about the group of privates I found last week hiding in an old factory like this one, and
how in one swift motion I punted four of them from the foot of the Strada into the
crumbling wall opposite, how it left them splattered & split apart like unripe squash
dropped three stories, and as I scrub my pits with rationed soap I laugh.





Wires burrow into the dirt like roots from a mangrove. My body spills out from the machine. My body spills into the ground. I'm choked by the same wires that had not so long ago sustained my life, although I can't help but remember that they choked me then as well. At this moment, metal, rubber, plastic, wiring, flesh, blood, bones; all has become eviscerated, indiscriminately. There are holes, gaping holes, where the apparatus I used to breath should be, as well as my lungs. Instead from the spot I hear only a faint whirring and whining, like something within is escaping, something that's been trapped for years, something that thought it was inseparable from the prison it resided in and in a moment has achieved freedom in a form it will only get to experience briefly before becoming the same as everything around. The air. The dirt. The minerals in the earth. I was told my suit elevated me above these things, above a mere human being, and it is only now that I realize anything can be rendered back into the stuff of matter that it really is. A man is no larger than the dirt he steps on and a mech can crush a living being into fine red pulp, but both break down. Both came from somewhere and will go back to it. I once saw awe in the faces of those looking upon my suit in function, the kind that brings a person to their knees, mouth dropping open, eyes wide and watery as they reconsider their place in the life they have been living for as long as they've had consciousness, I thought it apt, as watching steel obliterate life the same as they may wipe dust from a countertop rends a mind, ceases its function upon first observation, and I thought, "be not afraid". Now I am dirt. Now the steel is ore. Now the copper in my wires are a vein. Now the glass is sand. The last of the air escapes from my metal lungs and becomes the atmosphere. I am not afraid.

///LOVE LETTER

so who do you sing love songs to?

what i remember most from that night are the smell of the campfire next
to us

and the smell of her once we'd gone to bed, whispers in her ear

when i asked her if she ever liked it, what she felt

when the rounds left the barrel

to shred bodies and brains

at the command of her

hunter's whim.

she offered answers ageless and wise. and after

i told her how the cruelty felt like it surged up through my fingertips,

that i cast it from my body on command, lashing aside the living

like an explorer cutting away the brush that blocks his path.

she brushed her fingers through my hair and said

that it all came from without, not within,

that i had the most gentle eyes she'd ever seen,

that it was the first part of me

she fell in love with.

how does someone in her position

hold onto such belief? how could i lose her

so soon after making her mine?

worst of all: how can i miss her so much

when she died proudest of anyone

on that vile battlefield: gun in hand,

teeth clenched, eyes set forward

in the steely gaze that made me

fall in love with her, over and over

and over again?

all i ever struggle for are questions with no answers. yet to any & all i'm

happy to supply

the rage splayed from small arms fire:

the definitive answer, the permanent resolution.



that's
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Lyra:

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